

BLAKE PIERCE

BEFORE

HE

LONGS

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 10

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Блейк Пирс  
**Before He Longs**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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## **Пирс Б.**

Before He Longs / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,  
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From Blake Pierce, #1 bestselling author of ONCE GONE (a #1 bestseller with over 1,200 five star reviews), comes BEFORE HE LONGS, book #10 in the heart-pounding Mackenzie White mystery series. BEFORE HE LONGS is book #10 in the #1 bestselling Mackenzie White mystery series, which begins with BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1), a #1 bestseller with over 500 reviews! FBI Special Agent Mackenzie White is summoned when another body is found dead in a self storage unit. There at first appears to be no connection between the cases; yet as Mackenzie digs deeper, she realizes it is the work of a serial killer—and that he will soon strike again. Mackenzie will be forced to enter the mind of a madman as she tries to understand a psyche obsessed with clutter, storage, and claustrophobic places. It is a dark place from which she fears she may not return—and yet one which she must probe if she has any chance of winning the game of cat and mouse that can save new victims. Even then, it may be too late. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, BEFORE HE LONGS is book #10 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Also available by Blake Pierce is ONCE GONE (A Riley Paige mystery—Book #1), a #1 bestseller with over 1,200 five star reviews—and a free download!

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# **Blake Pierce**

## **Before He Longs**

**Blake Pierce**

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes thirteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising two books (and counting).

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit [www.blakepierceauthor.com](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.

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## Prologue

She was scared to open her eyes. She had closed them some time ago—how long, she didn't know—because she had been sure he was going to kill her. He hadn't, yet she was still unable to open her eyes. She did not want to see him or what he had in store for her. She hoped that when it came, her death would be a bit more painless if she wasn't aware of which method he used.

But with each minute that passed, Claire started to wonder if he had death on his mind at all. Her head was ringing from where he had hit her in the head with something. A hammer of some sort, she thought. The memory was murky, as was the memory of what had happened once he'd struck her on the head.

Even with her eyes closed, there were some things that Claire could deduce. At some point, he had placed her into the back seat of his car. She could hear the hum of the engine and the low volume of a local radio station (WRXS, playing only true and original grunge from the Seattle area). She could also smell something familiar, not a food smell but something organic.

*Just open your eyes, stupid, she thought. You know you're in a car and he's driving. He can't very well kill you now, can he?*

She willed herself to open her eyes. When she did, the car hit a small bump and started to slow down. She heard the low squeal of brakes and the crunching of gravel underneath the tires. "Love, Hate, Love" by Alice in Chains was on the radio. She saw the WRXS call letters in digital letters on the radio in front of her. She saw the shapes of the two seats between her and the man who had hit her in the head with the hammer.

Of course, there was also the fact that she was bound and gagged. She was pretty sure the thing he had put in her mouth and tightened around her cheeks was some sort of sex gag, complete with the red ball in the center. As for whatever was binding her arms together behind her back, it felt like some sort of nylon strap. She assumed that was the same thing tying her legs together at the ankles.

As if sensing she had opened her eyes, he turned around and faced her. He smiled at her and in that moment, she remembered why she had given in to him so easily. Psychotic or not, the man was handsome.

He turned back around and put the car in park. When he got out of the car and then opened the back door, he did so casually. It seemed like he did something like this every day. He reached in and grabbed her by the shoulders. When his right hand grazed harshly by her breast, she couldn't tell if it was intentional or not.

He pulled her toward him by the shoulders. She tried kicking at him but her bound ankles would not allow it. When she was in the open air and out of the car, she saw that it was nearly dusk. It was sprinkling rain—not really sprinkling, but what her father had always referred to as *spitting*—and foggy.

Behind them, she saw his car and a slight hill. A small gravel driveway and a length of chain that extended to an old dilapidated doghouse in the yard. The doghouse looked odd...as if it had been constructed to look old. And there was something inside of it...not a dog at all but a...

*What the hell is that?* she wondered. But she knew what it was. And it creeped her out. Her fear ramped up and something about the weirdly placed object in the doghouse made her sure that she was going to die—that the man carrying her over his shoulder was completely out of his mind.

There was a doll in there. Two of them, maybe. It was hard to tell. They had been set up to face one another, their heads angled slightly.

It looked like they were gazing out of the opening of the doghouse, watching her.

A gnawing horror settled itself in her mind and refused to let go.

"What are you doing to me?" she asked. "Please...I'll do anything if you let me go."

"I know you will," he told her. "Oh, I know."

He stepped up onto a rickety porch step and made a harsh swinging gesture with his right shoulder. Claire barely felt the impact of the railing against the side of her head. The darkness came on far too fast for her to really register it at all.

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She opened her eyes and knew that time had passed. Too much time.

And she had the feeling she was no longer at the house near that doghouse. She had been moved.

Her fear rocketed.

Where had he taken her now?

She cried out—and as soon as a moan left her mouth, he was there. His hand fell roughly on her mouth. He pressed himself against her. His breath smelled like old potato chips and everything about him from the waist down felt hard. She tried to fight against it but found that she was still tied up.

“It’ll be okay,” he said.

And with that, he kissed her on the mouth. It was a slow one, as if he was really savoring it. But there was also nothing lustful about it. Despite the obvious erection at her hip and the kiss itself, she could sense nothing at all sexual about what he was trying to do.

He stood up and looked down at her. He showed her the gag that had been in her mouth and applied it once more. She shook her head against it but he only pressed it down harder. When he dropped her head after attaching something in the back, it hit the floor.

Her eyes searched frantically for anything to help her and that’s when she knew for sure she was not in his house. No...this was different. There were various odds and ends everywhere, stacked against metal walls. A dim light bulb hung overhead.

*No, she thought. Not his house. This is like one of those storage lockers...hell, is this my storage locker?*

That’s exactly what it was. And this fact slammed into her brain harder than the floor had slammed into her back. It also made her fairly certain that she was indeed going to die after all.

He stood up and looked almost lovingly down at her. He smiled again and this time there was nothing handsome about him. Now he looked like a monster.

He walked away, opening a door that made an almost mechanical noise when it moved. He slammed it closed without another look at her.

In the darkness, Claire closed her eyes again and screamed against the ball gag in her mouth. It vibrated in her head until she thought her skull would crack in half. She screamed a silent scream until she could taste blood in her mouth, and sometime shortly after that, there was the darkness again.

## Chapter One

Mackenzie White's life had become something she had never envisioned for herself. She had never been into nice clothes or caring about fitting into the popular crowd. While she was strikingly beautiful by most people's standards, she had never been what her father had once called "the prissy sort."

Yet lately, she had felt that way. She blamed it on planning the wedding. She blamed it on the wedding magazines and cake tastings. From one potential wedding location to the next, from ordering fancy invitations to trying to decide on the reception menu—she had never felt more like a stereotypical female in her entire life.

That's why when she took the sleek and familiar nine-millimeter in her hand, it was claiming. It was like returning to an old friend that knew who she really was. She smiled at the feeling as she stepped into the entryway of the bureau's new simulated active shooter arena. Based on the idea behind the infamous Hogan's Alley—a tactical training facility designed to look like any urban street and used by the FBI ever since the late '80s—the new arena boasted state of the art equipment and new obstacles that most agents and agents-in-training had yet to experience. Among the equipment were robotic target arms equipped with infrared lights that worked much the same way as laser tag. If she did not down a target fast enough, the light on the arm would flash at her, triggering a small alarm on the vest she was wearing.

She thought of Ellington and how he had referred to it as the bureau's take on *American Ninja Warrior*. And he wasn't too far off as far as Mac was concerned. She looked up to the red light in the corner of the entryway, waiting for it to turn green. When it did, Mackenzie did not waste a single moment.

She entered the arena and instantly started looking for targets. The place was set up almost like a video game in that targets popped up from behind obstacles, corners, and even from the ceiling. They were all attached to robotic arms that remained hidden and, from what she understood, never popped the targets out in the same timed progression. Therefore, on this, her second time through, none of the targets she had downed the first time would come out when it had the previous time. It would always present itself as a new course.

Two steps in, a target came popping from behind a strategically placed crate. She popped it down with a round from the nine-millimeter and instantly started strafing forward looking for more. When it came, it came from the ceiling, a target roughly the size of a softball. Mackenzie put a round directly through its center as another target came from the right. She blasted through this one as well and continued into the room.

To say this was cathartic was an understatement. While she did not resent the wedding planning and the direction her life was taking, there was still some kind of freedom in allowing her body to move instinctually, reacting to intense situations. Mackenzie had not been part of an active case in nearly four months now, focusing on closing up the few loose ends in her father's case and, of course, the upcoming wedding with Ellington.

During that time, she had also gotten something of a promotion. While she still worked under Director McGrath and reported directly to him, she had been tasked with becoming something of his go-to agent. It was another reason she had not worked actively on any case in nearly four months; McGrath was busy trying to determine just what role he wanted her to play within the pool of agents under his watchful eye.

Mackenzie moved through the course like something mechanical, like a robot that had been programmed to do this very thing. She moved fluidly, she aimed with precision and speed, she ran expertly and without hesitation. If anything, the four months parked behind a desk and in meetings had given her more motivation to take part in these kinds of training exercises. When she *did* get

back out into the field, she fully intended to be a better agent than the one who had finally wrapped up her father's case.

She came to the end of the arena without really being aware that she was done. A large rolling metal door sat in the wall ahead of her. When she crossed the yellow line along the concrete of the arena that signified she was done, the door rolled upward. She then stepped into a small room with a table and a single monitor on the wall. The screen on the monitor showed her results. Seventeen targets, seventeen hits. Of the seventeen hits, nine were bull's-eye hits. Of the other eight, five were within twenty-five percent accuracy of being bull's-eyes. The overall rating for her course run was eighty-nine percent. It was five percent better than her previous run and nine percent better than any of the other one hundred nineteen results posted by other agents and trainees.

*Need more practice*, she thought as she exited the room and headed for the changing room. Before changing, she took her cell phone out of her backpack and saw that she had a text from Ellington.

**Mom just called. She'll be here a little early. Sorry...**

Mackenzie sighed deeply. She and Ellington were seeing a possible venue for the wedding today and had decided to invite his mother. It would be the first time Mackenzie had ever met her and she felt like she was in high school again, hoping to live up to the scrutinizing eye of a watchful and loving mother.

*Funny*, Mackenzie thought. *Exceptional gun skills, nerves of steel...and still afraid of meeting my future mother-in-law.*

This domesticated-life stuff was really starting to irritate her. Still, she felt that stirring of excitement as she changed into her street clothes. They were going to see the venue of her choice today. They were getting married in six weeks. It was time to be excited. And with that in mind, she headed back home with a smile on her face most of the way.

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As it turned out, Ellington was just as nervous about Mackenzie meeting his mom as Mackenzie was. When she returned to his apartment, he was pacing in the kitchen. He didn't look worried per se, but there was a nervous tension to the way he moved.

"You look scared," Mackenzie said as she took a seat on one of the barstools.

"Well, it just occurred to me that we'll be seeing this venue with my mother exactly two weeks after my divorce was finalized. Now, you and I and most rational human beings know that these things take a while because of paperwork and the snail-like pace of the government. But my mother...I guarantee you she's hanging on to this little bit of information, just waiting to spring it on me at a very bad time."

"You know, you're supposed to make me *want* to meet this woman," Mackenzie said.

"I know. And she's lovely most of the time. But she can be...well, a bitch when she wants to be."

Mackenzie got up and wrapped her arms around him. "That's her right as a woman. We all have it, you know."

"Oh, I know," he said with a smile and kissed her on the lips. "So...you ready for this?"

"I've put away killers. I've been in some high-octane chases and have stared down the barrels of countless guns. So...no. No, I'm not ready. This scares me."

"Then we'll be scared together."

They left the apartment in the casual way they had been doing ever since they had moved in together. For all intents and purposes, Mackenzie already felt like she was married to the man. She knew everything about him. She had gotten used to his light snoring and even his tendency toward '80s glam metal. She was starting to truly love the little touches of gray he was already getting along the base of his temples.

She'd been through hell with Ellington, encountering some of her tougher cases with him by her side. So surely they'd be able to tackle marriage together—temperamental in-laws and all.

“I have to ask,” Mackenzie said as they got into his car. “Do you feel any lighter now that the divorce is final? Can you feel the space where that monkey used to be on your back?”

“It does feel lighter,” he said. “But that was a pretty heavy monkey.”

“Should we have invited her to the wedding? Seems your mom might have appreciated that.”

“One of these days, I'll find you funny. I promise.”

“I hope so,” Mackenzie said. “It'll be a long life together if you keep missing my comedic genius.”

He reached out and took her hand, beaming at her as if they were a couple who had just fallen in love. He drove them toward the venue where she was pretty sure they were getting married, both of them so happy that they could practically see the future, bright and shining just ahead of them.

## Chapter Two

Quinn Tuck had one simple dream: to sell the contents of some of these abandoned storage units to some schmuck like the ones he saw on that show *Storage Wars*. There was decent money in what he did; he brought home almost six grand every month on the storage units he maintained. And after knocking the mortgage on his house out last year, he'd been able to save just enough to be able to take his wife to Paris—something she hadn't shut up about since they'd started dating twenty-five years ago.

Really, he'd love to sell the whole place and just move away somewhere. Maybe somewhere in Wyoming, a place no one ever yearned for but was still fairly scenic and inexpensive. But his wife would never go for that—although she'd probably be happy if he got out of the storage unit business.

First of all, most of the clients were pretentious dicks. They were, after all, the types of people who had so many belongings that they had to rent extra space to store it all in. And second of all, she wouldn't miss the random calls on a Saturday from finicky unit owners, complaining of some of the dumbest things. This morning's call had come from an older woman who rented two units. She'd been taking things out of one of her units and claimed to have smelled something awful coming from one of the units near hers.

Usually, Quinn would say he'd check it out but do nothing. But this was a tricky situation. He'd had a similar complaint two years ago. He waited three days to check it out only to find that a raccoon had somehow managed to get into one of the units but not get back out. When Quinn found it, it had bloated and swollen up, dead for at least a week.

And that's why he was pulling his truck into the lot of his primary unit space on a Saturday morning instead of sleeping in and trying to coax some mid-morning sex out of his wife with promises of that Paris trip. This storage unit complex was his smaller one. It was an outdoor complex with fifty-four units in all. The rent for these was on the lower end and all but nine of them were rented out.

Quinn got out of his truck and walked out among the units. Each square of units contained six storage spaces, all the same size. He walked to the third block of units and realized that the woman who had called this morning had not been overdramatic. He could smell something wretched as well and the storage unit in question was still two whole units away. He took out his keyring and started cycling through them all until he came to the one for Unit 35.

By the time he got to the door of the unit, he was nearly afraid to open it. Something smell *bad*. He started to wonder if someone, somehow, had accidentally trapped their dog inside without knowing it. And somehow, no one had heard it barking and whimpering to get out. It was an image that stripped away all of Quinn's thoughts of getting freaky with his wife on a Saturday morning.

Wincing from the smell, Quinn inserted the key into the lock of Unit 35. When the lock popped open, Quinn removed it from the latch and then rolled the accordion-style door up.

The odor hit him so strongly that he took two heavy steps back, fearing he might actually puke. He held his hand to his mouth and nose, taking one small step forward.

But that's the only step he took. He saw what the smell was coming from by simply standing outside of the unit.

There was a body on the floor of the unit. It was up close to the front, a few feet away from the stacked things in the back—small lockers, cardboard boxes, and milk crates filled with a little of everything.

The body was a woman who looked to be in her early twenties. Quinn could not see any clear wounds on her, but there was a fair amount of blood puddled around her. It had gone beyond wet or sticky, having dried on the concrete floor.

She was pale as a sheet and her eyes were wide and unblinking. For a moment, Quinn thought she was staring right at him.

He felt a little cry rise up in his throat. Backing away before it could escape, Quinn dug his phone out of his pocket and called 911. He wasn't even sure if that was who you called for something like this but it was all he could think to do.

As the phone rang and the dispatcher answered, Quinn tried to back away but found himself unable to take his eyes off of the grisly sight, his gaze locked with that of the dead woman in the unit.

## Chapter Three

Neither Mackenzie nor Ellington wanted a big wedding. Ellington claimed he had gotten all of the wedding nonsense out of his system with his first marriage but wanted to make sure Mackenzie got everything she wanted. Her own tastes were simple. She would have been perfectly happy in a basic church. No bells, no whistles, no fabricated elegance.

But then Ellington's father had called them shortly after they had gotten engaged. His father, who had never really been part of Ellington's life, congratulated him but also informed him that he'd be unable to attend any wedding that Ellington's mother was at. He did, however, compensate for his future absence by connecting with a very wealthy friend in DC and booking the Meridian House for them. It was an almost obscene gift but it had also put an end to the question of when to marry. As it turned out, that answer was four months after the engagement, thanks to Ellington's father booking a particular date: September 5th.

And while that day was still two and a half months away, it felt much closer than that when Mackenzie stood in the gardens adjacent to the Meridian House. The day was perfect and everything about the place seemed to have been recently touched up and landscaped.

*I'd marry him right here tomorrow if I could*, she thought. As a rule, Mackenzie typically didn't give in to overly girly impulses but something about the idea of getting married here made her feel a certain way—somewhere between romantic and absolutely geeking out. She loved the old-world feel of the place, the simple warm charm and the gardens.

As she stood and took the place in, Ellington approached her from behind and placed his arms around her waist. "So...yeah, this is the place."

"Yeah, it is," she said. "We need to tell your father thank you. Again. Or maybe just un-invite your mother so he will show up."

"It might be a bit too late for that," Ellington said. "Especially since that's her, walking up the sidewalk to our right."

Mackenzie looked in that direction and saw an older woman whom the years had been kind to. She was wearing black sunglasses that made her look exceptionally young and sophisticated in a way that was nearly annoying. When she spotted Mackenzie and Ellington standing in between two large beds of flowers and shrubs, she waved with a little too much enthusiasm.

"She looks sweet," Mackenzie said.

"So do candy bars. But have enough of them and they'll rot your teeth."

Mackenzie couldn't help but snicker at this, biting it down as Ellington's mother joined them.

"I'm hoping you're Mackenzie," she said.

"I am," Mackenzie said, unsure of how to take the joke.

"Of course you are, dear," she said. She gave Mackenzie a lazy hug and a bright smile. "And I'm Frances Ellington...but only because it's too much of a hassle to get my last name changed."

"Hello, Mother," Ellington said, stepping in to hug her.

"Son. My oh my, how on earth did you two manage to nail this place down? It's positively gorgeous!"

"I've worked in DC long enough to make friends with the right people," Ellington lied.

Mackenzie cringed inside. She absolutely understood why he felt the need to lie, but also felt at odds with being part of such a huge one involving her mother-in-law-to-be at this stage of their relationship.

"But not people that could help expedite the paperwork and legal ramifications of your divorce, I take it?"

It was a comment made with a bit of a sarcastic tone, meant to be a joke. But Mackenzie had interrogated enough people and knew enough about behaviors and facial twitches to know when

someone was simply being cruel. Maybe it *was* a joke, but there was also some truth and bitterness to it.

Ellington, though, took in stride. “Nope. Haven’t made friends like that. But you know, Mom, I’d really rather focus on today. On Mackenzie—a woman who isn’t going to run me through the mud like the first wife you seem to be hung up on.”

*My God, this is terrible*, Mackenzie thought.

She had to make a decision right there and then, and she knew it might affect her future mother-in-law’s opinion of her, but she could deal with that later. She was about to make a comment, to excuse herself so that Ellington and his mother could have this tense conversation in private.

But then her phone rang. She checked it and saw McGrath’s name. She took it as the opportunity she needed, holding the phone close to her and stating: “So sorry, but I need to take this.”

Ellington gave her a skeptical look as she walked a bit further down the sidewalk. She answered the call as she hid herself behind some elaborate rose bushes.

“This is Agent White,” she answered.

“White, I need you to come in. You and Ellington both, I think. There’s a case I need to stick you two on ASAP.”

“Are you in the office right now? On a Sunday?”

“I wasn’t. But this call brought me here. When can the two of you be here?”

She grinned and looked to Ellington, still bickering with his mother. “Oh, I think we can make it pretty quickly,” she said.

## Chapter Four

Being Sunday, there was no one at the desk in the small waiting area outside of McGrath's office. In fact, his office door was standing open when Mackenzie and Ellington arrived. Mackenzie knocked on the door before entering anyway, knowing what a stickler McGrath could be when it came to privacy.

"Come on in," McGrath called out.

When they entered, they found McGrath behind his desk, rummaging through several folders. Papers were strewn everywhere and his desk looked to be in a mild state of chaos. Seeing a usually tidy McGrath in such a state made Mackenzie wonder just what sort of case had managed to fluster him this much.

"I appreciate you coming so quickly," McGrath said. "I know you're using most of your free time to plan the wedding."

"Hey, you tore me away from my mother," Ellington said. "I'll tackle whatever case you throw at me."

"That's good to hear," McGrath said, selecting a pile of paper-clipped papers from the clutter on his desk and tossing it to him. "Ellington, when you first started as a field agent, I had you working cleanup in a case in Salem, Oregon. A deal with the storage units. You remember it?"

"I do, actually. Five bodies, all turned up dead in storage units. No killer was ever found. It was assumed that when the FBI got involved, he got scared and stopped."

"That's the one. There's been an ongoing search for the guy but it's come up with nothing. And it's been the better part of eight years."

"Did someone finally find him?" Ellington asked. He was looking through the papers McGrath had handed him. Mackenzie caught a peek as well and saw a few reports and details from the Oregon murders.

"No. But bodies have started to show up in storage units again. This time in Seattle. One was found last week, which could be ruled as coincidence. But a second was found yesterday. The body had been dead for a while—at least four days from the looks of it."

"So then it's fairly safe to say that the cases in Seattle are no longer being considered isolated incidents?" Mackenzie speculated.

"That's right. So the case is yours, White." McGrath then turned to Ellington. "I don't know about sending you, though. I'd like to because you two manage to work well together despite the relationship. But this close to the wedding..."

"It's your call, sir," Ellington said. Mackenzie was rather surprised by how flippant he was being about the call. "But I do think my history with the Oregon case could benefit Macken—Agent White. Plus, two heads and all of that..."

McGrath contemplated it for a moment, looking back and forth between the two of them. "I'll allow it, but this might very well be the final case the two of you are partnered on. I already have enough people uneasy with an engaged couple working together. Once you're married, you can forget about it."

Mackenzie understood this and even thought it was a good idea in principle. She nodded along with McGrath's explanation as she took the papers from Ellington's hand. She didn't take the time to read them right there, not wanting to appear rude. But she scanned them just enough to get the gist.

Five bodies had been discovered in storage units in 2009, all found within a span of ten days. One of the bodies seemed to have been killed rather recently while one had been killed so long before its discovery that the flesh had started to rot from its bones. Three suspects had been brought in but were ultimately cleared thanks to alibis and a lack of any real evidence.

“Of course, we’re also not prepared to say there’s a direct link between the two, right?” she asked.

“No, not yet,” McGrath said. “But that’s one of the things I’d like you to figure out. Look for connections while trying to find this guy.”

“Anything else?” Ellington asked.

“No. Transportation is being handled as we speak, but you should be in the air within four hours. I’d really like this wrapped up before this maniac can net another five people like he did before.”

“I thought we weren’t saying there’s a direct link,” Mackenzie said.

“Not officially, no,” McGrath said. And then, as if unable to help himself, he smirked and turned to Ellington. “You get to live with that sort of scrutiny for the rest of your life?”

“Oh yeah,” Ellington said. “And I look forward to it.”

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They were halfway back to his apartment before Ellington bothered calling his mother. He explained that they had been called away and asked if she would like to try to get together sometime after they got back. Mackenzie listened closely, barely able to hear his mother’s reply. She said something about the perils of a romantic couple working together *and* living together. Ellington cut her off before she could really get going.

When he ended the call, Ellington tossed his phone on the floorboard and sighed. “So, Mom sends her best.”

“I’m sure.”

“But the thing she said about husband and wife also working together...you prepared for that?”

“You heard McGrath,” she said. “That won’t happen after we’re married.”

“I know. But still. We’ll be in the same building, hearing about each other’s cases. There are days where I think that would be awesome...but others when I wonder just how weird it could get.”

“Why? You afraid I’m going to eventually overshadow you?”

“Oh, you already have,” he said with a smile. “You just refuse to acknowledge it.”

As they rushed to the apartment and then through the chore of packing, the reality of the situation hit her for the first time. This could be the last case she and Ellington ever worked on together. She was sure that they would look back on their cases together fondly when they got older, almost as a sort of inside joke. But for now, with the wedding still looming and two dead bodies waiting on the other side of the country, it was felt daunting—like the end of something special.

*I guess we’ll just have to go out with a bang*, she thought as she packed her bag. She peeked over at Ellington, also packing a bag for the trip, and smiled. Sure, they were about to head into a potentially dangerous case and lives were likely on the line, but she couldn’t wait to get on the road with him one more time...perhaps one *last* time.

## Chapter Five

They arrived in Seattle with two crime scenes to visit: the location of the first victim, discovered eight days ago, and the location of the second victim, discovered just the day before. Mackenzie had never visited Seattle before so she was almost disappointed to see that one of the city's stereotypes appeared to very much be true: it was drizzling rain when they landed at the airport. The drizzle held up until they were in their rental car and then grew to a steady pour as they headed out to Seattle Storage Solution, the location of the most recently discovered body.

When they arrived, there was a middle-aged man waiting for them in his pickup truck. He stepped out, unlatched an umbrella, and greeted them at their car. He handed them another umbrella with a lopsided smile.

"No one from out of town really ever thinks to bring one," he explained as Ellington took it. He popped it up and, as chivalrous as ever, made sure Mackenzie was fully underneath it.

"Thanks," Ellington said.

"Quinn Tuck," the man said, offering his hand.

"Agent Mackenzie White," Mackenzie said, taking the offered hand. Ellington did the same, introducing himself as well.

"Come on, then," Quinn said. "No sense in putting it off. I'd rather be home, if it's all the same to you. The body's gone, thank Jesus, but the unit still gives me the heebie jeebies."

"Is this the first time you've ever had something like this happen before?" Mackenzie asked.

"It's the first thing this *terrible*, sure. I had a dead raccoon caught in a unit one time. And this other time, wasps somehow got into a unit, made a nest, and dive bombed the renter. But yeah... nothing this bad before."

Quinn brought them to a unit with a black **35** plastered above the garage-style door. The door was open and a policeman was milling around in the back of the unit. He carried a pen and notepad, jotting down something as Mackenzie and Ellington entered.

The policeman turned to them and smiled. "You folks with the bureau?" he asked.

"We are," Ellington said.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Deputy Paul Rising. I thought I'd be out here when you arrived. I'm taking notes on everything stored in here, hoping to find some sort of clues. Because as of right now, there's exactly none."

"Were you on the scene when the body was removed?"

"Unfortunately. It was pretty gruesome. A woman named Claire Locke, age twenty-five. She'd been dead for at least a week. It's not clear if she starved to death or bled out first."

Mackenzie slowly took in the sight of the unit. The back was stocked with boxes, milk crates, and several old trunks—typical things to be found in a storage unit. But the bloodstain on the floor made it quite different indeed. It wasn't a very large one, but she guessed it could have resulted in enough blood loss to lead to death. Perhaps it was her imagination, but she was pretty sure she could still smell some of the stench the body had left behind.

While Deputy Rising went on about his business with the boxes and bins in the back, Mackenzie and Ellington started to investigate the rest of the interior. As far as Mackenzie was concerned, a bloodstain on the floor pointed to something else worth finding. As she looked around for any clues, she listened to Ellington as he asked Rising about the case details.

"Was the woman bound or gagged in any way?" Ellington asked.

"Both. Hands tied behind her back, ankles tied together, and one of those ball gags in her mouth. The blood you see on the floor there came from a small stab wound high in her stomach."

Being bound and gagged at least explained why Claire Locke had been unable to make any noise to alert people on the other side of the unit walls. Mackenzie tried to imagine a woman locked in this cramped little space with no light, food, or water. It pissed her off.

As she slowly made a circuit around the unit, she came to the corner of the doorway. Rain drummed down in front of her, slapping at the concrete outside. But just along the inside of the metal door frame, Mackenzie spotted something. It was very low to the ground, at the very base of the frame that allowed the door to slide up and down.

She dropped to her knees and leaned in closer. When she did, she saw a splotch of blood on the edge of the groove. Not much...so little, in fact, that she doubted any of the cops had seen it yet. And then, on the floor just beneath the splotch of blood, was something small, ragged, and white.

Mackenzie gently touched it with her finger. It was piece of a torn fingernail.

Somehow, Claire Locke had managed to try to escape. Mackenzie closed her eyes for a moment, trying to envision it. Depending on how her hands had been tied, she could have backed up to the door, knelt down, and tried lifting the door upward. It would have been a futile attempt due to the lock outside, but certainly worth trying if you were on the verge of starving or bleeding to death.

Mackenzie waved Ellington over and showed him what she had found. She then turned to Rising and asked: “Do you recall if there were any additional injuries to Ms. Locke’s hands?”

“Yes, actually,” he said. “There were a few superficial cuts on her right hand. And I think most of one of her fingernails was missing.”

He came over to where Mackenzie and Ellington were standing and let out a little “*Oh.*”

Mackenzie continued looking but found nothing more than a few stray hairs. Hairs she assumed would belong to either Claire Locke or the owner of the unit.

“Mr. Tuck?” she said.

Quinn was standing just outside of the unit, perched under his umbrella. He was doing everything he could to not be standing in the unit—to not even be looking inside. At the sound of his name, though, he stepped inside reluctantly.

“Who does this unit belong to?”

“That’s the fucked up part,” he said. “Claire Locke had been renting this unit out for the last seven months.”

Mackenzie nodded as she looked to the back, where Locke’s belongings were stacked to the ceiling in neat little rows. The fact that it was her storage unit did add a degree of eeriness to it, but, she thought, might work to their advantage in eventually establishing motive or even tracking down the killer.

“Are there security cameras around here?” Ellington asked.

“I just have one right up at the front entrance,” Quinn Tuck said.

“We’ve watched all of the footage from the last few weeks,” Deputy Rising said. “There’s nothing out of the ordinary. Currently, we’re speaking to everyone who showed up here anytime during the last two weeks. As you can imagine, it’s going to be tedious. We still have a dozen or so people to question.”

“Any chance we could get our hands on that footage?” Mackenzie asked.

“Absolutely,” Rising said, though his tone indicated that she was nuts to want to go fishing through it.

Mackenzie followed Ellington to the back of the unit. Part of her wanted to rummage through the boxes and bins but she knew it would likely not lead to much of anything. Once they had leads or potential suspects, they *may* find something worthwhile but until then, the contents within the unit would mean nothing to them.

“Is the body still with the coroner?” Mackenzie asked.

“To the best of my knowledge,” Rising said. “Want me to call and let them know you’re coming?”

“Please. And see what you can do about getting us that video footage.”

“Oh, I can send that, Agent White,” Quinn said. “It’s all digital. Just let me know where you want me to send it.”

“Come on,” Rising said. “I’ll lead you to the coroner’s office. It’s just happens to be two floors below my office.”

With that, the four of them exited the storage unit and walked back out into the rain. Even under the umbrella, it was loud. It came down slow but hard, as if trying to wash away the sights and smells the unit had seen.

## Chapter Six

As it turned out, Quinn Tuck was extremely helpful. It seemed he wanted to get to the bottom of what had happened just as badly as anyone. That's why, when Mackenzie and Ellington got to the police station, he had provided a link for them to access all of his digital files from the security system at the storage complex.

They decided to start with the security footage rather than the body of Claire Locke. It gave them a chance to sit down and somewhat collect their bearings. It was nearing nightfall now and the rain was still coming down. As Deputy Rising got them set up with a monitor, Mackenzie looked back on the day and found it hard to believe that she had been standing in a picturesque garden and thinking about her wedding less than nine hours ago.

"Here are the relevant time stamps," Rising said, slipping Mackenzie a piece of paper from his notepad. "There aren't many." He tapped his finger at one entry in particular, written in slanted handwriting. "This is the only time we see Claire Locke enter the complex. We pulled her DMV info and got her license plate number, so we know it's her. And this," he said, tapping at another entry, "is when she left. And these are the only times she shows up on the footage."

"Thanks, Deputy," Ellington said. "This helps tremendously."

Rising gave a little nod of acknowledgment before backing out of the tiny spare office the agents had been given. The monotonous work took a while, but as Rising had indicated, the local PD had already done some of the work for them. They were able to fast-track the footage when there was no activity on the screen. They started by checking the time stamps on the sheet of paper. When the car said to belong to Claire Locke came onto the screen, Mackenzie zoomed in but was unable to see a driver. She waited, watching the featureless entrance of the complex for twenty-two sped up minutes before Locke's car was shown leaving. In the time she had spent there, no one else had arrived and no other cars had left.

"You know," Mackenzie said, "it's entirely possible that she was not attacked *at* the storage unit."

"You think someone killed her elsewhere and brought her to the site?"

"Maybe not *killed* her somewhere else, but potentially abducted her. I think seeing her body will help determine that. If she shows signs of starvation or dehydration, that basically *tells* us that she was dumped there."

"But according to the report, the lock was bolted from the outside."

"So maybe someone else has the key," Mackenzie suggested.

"Probably someone in one of the other cars on these days and days of footage."

"Most likely."

"You want to stay here and roll through this while I go check out the body?" Ellington asked. "Or the other way around?"

Mackenzie pictured the poor woman, alone in the dark and unable to so much as scream for help. She envisioned her stumbling in the dark to try to find some way to at least try to get that door open.

"I think I'd like to check the body. You good here?"

"Oh yeah. This is streaming at its finest. No commercials or anything."

"Good," she said. "See you in a bit."

She leaned down and kissed him on the side of the mouth before leaving. She did it naturally and without much thought, even though it wasn't the most professional thing. It was a good reminder of just why they wouldn't be able to work together in this capacity after they were married.

Mackenzie left the little office space in search of the morgue while Ellington watched time unroll in fast-forward motion on the screen.

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The question as to whether or not Claire Locke had experienced starvation or dehydration of any degree during her time in the storage unit was answered the moment Mackenzie saw her. While Mackenzie was not an expert on the subject, there was a hollow look to the young woman's cheeks. There might have been a similar look to her stomach as well but it was not clear due to the incision the coroner had made.

The woman who met her at the morgue was a rotund and eerily pleasant woman named Amanda Dumas. She greeted Mackenzie warmly and stood back against a small steel table that was adorned with the tools of her trade.

"Based on your examination," Mackenzie said, "would you say that the victim experienced severe hunger or dehydration before she died?"

"Yes, though I don't know to what extent, exactly," Amanda said. "There's very little fatty acid in her stomach—hardly any at all. That, plus some signs of muscle deterioration, indicates that she experienced at least the first pangs of starvation. There are telltale signs of dehydration as well, though I can't be sure that either of those is what killed her."

"You think she bled out first?"

"I do. And quite frankly, that would have been a blessing for her."

"Based on what you've seen with the body, do you believe she was alive when she was placed in the storage unit?"

"Oh, without a doubt. And I'd say it was against her will as well." Amanda stepped forward and pointed to the abrasions on Locke's right hand. "Looks like she put up a fight of some kind and then tried her best to escape at some point."

Mackenzie saw the cuts and noted that one of them looked rather ragged. It could have easily been placed there by the grooved runner that the unit door ran within. She also saw the fingernail that had been torn.

"There's also bruising along the back of her head," Amanda said. She used a comb-like tool to move Claire's hair aside. She did so with a loving sort of respect and care. When she did this, Mackenzie was able to see an angry purple bruise along the upper base of her neck where her skull joined it.

"Any signs that she was drugged?" Mackenzie asked.

"None. I still have one chemical analysis I'm waiting on, but based on everything else I've seen, I'm not expecting anything from it."

Mackenzie assumed the bruise to the back of the head along with the ball gag found in her mouth was more than enough reason for Claire Locke to not have raised any fuss or alarm when she was carried into the storage unit. She thought about the video footage again, certain that the driver of one of the cars was responsible for her murder—and the death of the other person found last week, according to the reports.

Mackenzie looked back down at the body with a frown. It was a natural reaction to always feel some sort of remorse for anyone who had been murdered. But Mackenzie was feeling a stronger sense of sadness with Claire Locke. Maybe it was because she could picture her all alone in that dark storage unit, unable to properly move or call out for help.

"Thanks for the information," Mackenzie said. "My partner and I will be in town for a few days. Let me know if anything shows up in that last chemical report."

She left the morgue and headed back up to the main floor. On her way back to the little office she and Ellington were working out of, she stopped by the dispatch desk and requested a copy of the current file on Claire Locke. She had it in her hands two minutes later and carried it back to the office.

She found Ellington staring at the monitor, reclined back in his chair.

“Anything so far?” she asked.

“Nothing concrete. I’ve watched seven more vehicles come and go. One stayed for about six hours before leaving. I want to check with the PD to see which of these people they have already spoken with. For Claire Locke to end up in that storage unit, someone on this footage had to have driven her there.”

Mackenzie nodded in agreement as she started looking through the file. Locke had no criminal record at all and the personal details didn’t offer much. She was twenty-five years old, graduated from UCLA two years ago, and had been working as a digital artist with a local marketing firm. Divorced parents, the father living in Hawaii and the mother somewhere in Canada. No husband, no kids, but there was a note along the bottom of the personal details sheet that stated her boyfriend had been informed of her death. He’d been called yesterday at three in the afternoon.

“How much time do you have left on that?” she asked.

Ellington shrugged. “Three more days, it looks like.”

“You good here while I head out to speak to Claire Locke’s boyfriend?”

“I guess,” he said with a comical sigh. “Married life is coming up. Better get used to seeing me sitting in front of a screen all the time. Especially during football season.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “As long as you’re fine with me heading out and doing my own thing while you’re doing it.”

And to show him what she meant, she headed back out. She called over her shoulder: “Give me a few hours.”

“Sure thing. But don’t expect dinner to be ready when you get back.”

The banter between them made her incredibly happy that McGrath had allowed them to work this case together. Between the gloom and rain outside and her peculiar sadness toward Claire Locke, she didn’t know if she would have been able to properly handle this case on her own. But with Ellington here, she felt that she had a piece of home with her—somewhere to return in the event the case got too overwhelming.

She headed back outside. Night had fallen and although the rain had once again settled down to a lazy drizzle, Mackenzie couldn’t help but feel that it was an omen of sorts.

## Chapter Seven

Mackenzie knew nothing about the boyfriend, as there was nothing about him in the notes. All she knew was that his name was Barry Channing and that he lived at 376 Rose Street, Apartment 7. When she knocked on the door of Apartment 7, it was answered by a woman who looked to be in her late fifties or so. She looked tired and saddened—and clearly not happy to have a visitor after nine o'clock on a rainy Sunday night.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked.

Mackenzie nearly double-checked the number on the door but instead stated, “I’m looking for Barry Channing.”

“I’m his mother. Who are you?”

Mackenzie showed her ID. “Mackenzie White, with the FBI. I was hoping to ask him some questions about Claire.”

“He’s really in no state to talk to anyone,” the mother said. “In fact, he—”

“My God, Mom,” a male voice said, coming toward the door. “I’m okay.”

The mother stepped aside, making room for her son to stand in the doorway. Barry Channing was rather tall and had close-cropped blond hair. Like his mother, he looked low on sleep and it was clear that he had been crying.

“You said you’re with the FBI?” Barry said.

“Yes. Do you have a few minutes?”

Barry looked at his mother with a small frown and then sighed. “Yes, I have some time. Come in, please.”

Barry led Mackenzie into the apartment, down a thin hallway, and into a generic-looking kitchen. His mother, meanwhile, sulked on further down the hallway and out of sight. As Barry settled into a chair at the kitchen table, Mackenzie heard a door close rather forcefully from somewhere else in the apartment.

“Sorry about that,” Barry said. “I’m starting to think my mother was closer to Claire than I was. And that’s saying a lot, seeing as how I purchased an engagement ring two weeks ago.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” Mackenzie said.

“I’ve been hearing that a lot,” Barry said, looking at the tabletop. “It was unexpected and while I did cry like a baby when the police told me yesterday, I’m managing to keep it together. Mom came over to stay with me to help me get through the funeral and I’m thankful for her help, but she’s a little overprotective. Once she’s gone, I’ll probably let all the grief out, you know?”

“I’m going to ask what might seem like a dumb question,” Mackenzie said. “But do you know of anyone that might have any reason to do this to Claire?”

“No. The police asked the same thing. She didn’t have any enemies, you know? She and her mother didn’t get along, but it wasn’t nearly to the level that would cause this. Claire was a sort of private person, you know? No close friends or anything... just acquaintances. That sort of thing.”

“When did you see her last?” Mackenzie asked.

“Eight days ago. She came by here to see if I had anything I needed to put in her storage unit. We had a laugh over it. She didn’t know I had the ring. But we both knew we were going to get married. We started making plans for it. Her asking if I had anything to put in her unit was just another way of reinforcing it, you know?”

“After that day, how long passed before you started to get frightened? I don’t see where you filed a missing persons report or anything like that.”

“Well, I’m taking classes at the community college, getting my GPA up to get back to college and finally finish. It’s a huge workload and that’s on top of a job where I put in forty to forty-five hours a week. So there would be four or five days that would go by where Claire and I wouldn’t

see one another. But after three days and no texts or calls, I did start to get worried. I went by her apartment to check on her and she didn't answer. I thought about calling the police, but it seemed stupid. And really, deep in the back of my head, I wondered if she had just up and left me. That maybe the whole idea of getting married had scared her or something."

"On that last time you saw her, did she seem okay? Was she acting out of the ordinary?"

"No, she was great. In a good mood."

"By any chance, do you know what she was going to the storage unit to store?"

"Probably some of her textbooks from college. She'd been carrying them around in her trunk for a while."

"Do you know how long she'd been renting that unit?"

"About six months. She was moving stuff from California and storing it. Again...we had this thing where we felt we were going to get married so instead of moving stuff straight into her apartment, she left some of it in the unit. It's why she rented it at all, I think. I told her she didn't need it but she kept saying how it would be so much easier when we moved in together."

"I asked about Claire having any enemies...but how about you? Is there anyone that would do this to hurt you?"

Barry looked stunned, as if he had never considered such a thing. He shook his head slowly and she thought he might start weeping. "No. But I almost wish there was. It would help to make sense of this. Because I just don't know anyone that would want Claire dead. She was just...she was very kind. The sweetest person you could ever meet."

Mackenzie could tell that he was being sincere. She also knew that she was not going to get anything out of Barry Channing. She placed one of her business cards on the table and slid it over to him.

"If you think of anything at all, please call me," she said.

He took the card and only nodded.

Mackenzie felt that she should say something else but it was one of those moments where it was clear that there was nothing more to say. She made her way to the door and as she closed it behind her she felt a pang of regret as she heard Barry Channing begin to cry.

The rain outside was little more than a mist now. As she walked back to her car, she called Ellington, hoping the rain would die out completely. She wasn't quite sure why it was bothering her so much. It just *did*.

"This is Ellington," he answered, never one to check his display before answering.

"You done with watching TV yet?"

"I am, actually," he replied. "I'm working with Deputy Rising right now to cross off the people on the list that they've already spoken to. Anything new on your end?"

"No. But I want to go to the storage unit that the first body was found in. Can you get that information from Rising and meet me in front of the station in about twenty minutes? And see if someone can get the owner on the phone."

"Can do. See you then."

They ended the call and Mackenzie drove on, thinking of the grieving boyfriend she had left behind...thinking of Claire Locke, alone in the dark, starving and terrified in her last moments.

## Chapter Eight

Mackenzie and Ellington arrived at U-Store-It at 10:10. The facility was different from Seattle Storage Solution in that it was an actual building. The structure itself looked as if it had once been a small warehouse of some kind but the exterior had been prettied up with simple landscaping that was only half revealed in the small lights that bordered the sidewalk. Because they called ahead, a light was on inside as the owner and manager of the place waited for them.

The owner met them at the door, a small and overweight man with glasses named Ralph Underwood. He seemed pleased to have them there and didn't make much of an attempt to hide the fact that he was quite taken with Mackenzie.

He led them through the front of the building, which consisted of a small waiting area and even smaller conference room. He'd done a good job of making the place look warm and cozy but it still had the smell of an old warehouse.

"How many units do you have here?" Ellington asked.

"One hundred and fifty," Underwood said. "Each unit has a door along the back so things can easily be loaded and unloaded from the outside rather than having to come in through the front of the building."

"Seems pretty efficient," Mackenzie said, never having seen a storage complex that was held totally within another building.

"You said on the phone you were interested in learning more about the body I found two weeks ago, correct?"

"That's right," Mackenzie said. She'd had Rising send her over the report and she read from it now, on her phone. "Elizabeth Newcomb, age thirty. According to the police report she was found in her own storage unit, dead due to a stab wound to the chest."

"I don't know about all of that," Underwood said. "All I know is that when I came in that morning and walked the grounds like I always do, I saw something red along the edge of the unit door. I knew what it was right away but tried to convince myself I was wrong. But when I unlocked the unit, there she was. Lying on the floor, dead, in a pool of blood."

He told the story as if he were sitting at a campfire. It irritated Mackenzie a little but she also knew that people with a bent toward the dramatic were often good sources of information.

"Ever find anything like that before?" Ellington asked.

"No. But I tell you...I've had about a dozen or so units abandoned. It's in my contract that if the unit has not been opened at least once within three months, I call the user just to make sure they're still interested in the space. If there has been no communication after six months, I sell the units at auction, belongings and all."

Mackenzie knew that this was a common practice but as far as she was concerned, it seemed nearly illegal.

"Some of the things people leave in these units are...well, disturbing," Underwood went on. "In three of the abandoned units I've had, there was all kinds of sex toys. Someone had fifteen guns in theirs, including two AK-47s. One unit apparently belonged to a taxidermist because there were four stuffed animals...and I'm not talking teddy bears, you know?"

Underwood took them through a door at the back of the little entrance wing. There was no transition after the door; they walked through and were standing in a very wide hallway. The floor was concrete and the ceiling sat about twenty feet overhead. Now, more than ever, Mackenzie was convinced the place had once indeed been a warehouse of some kind. The units were broken into clusters of five, each cluster broken by a hallway that ran to the side of the building both ways. The clusters were on each side of the building, set up in a way that, when you looked down the central

middle hallway, there seemed to be no end to them. Now that they were inside, Mackenzie saw the depth and range of the place for what it was. The building was easily one hundred yards long.

“The unit you want to see is just right up here a bit,” Underwood said. They walked along for about two minutes, Underwood going on and on about the odd collectibles he had found in some of the abandoned units, as well as treasures like mint condition toys, valuable comics, and one honest-to-God unopened safe that had more than five grand in it.

He finally brought them to a stop in front of a unit marked C-2. He had apparently pre-selected the key before their arrival; he dug a single key out of his pocket and unlocked the deadbolt lock on the door runner. He then slid the door up, revealing the musty inside. Underwood flicked a light switch on the wall and the light that shone down from the room revealed a mostly empty storage unit.

“No family has been by to claim her things?” Mackenzie asked.

“I got a call from her mother four days ago,” he said. “She’s coming by at some point, but she didn’t set a date or anything.”

Mackenzie walked around the unit, looking for anything that might look similar to what they had seen in Claire Locke’s unit. But either Elizabeth Newcomb had not had the fighting spirit of Claire Locke or the evidence of her struggles had already been cleaned up by the PD and local detectives.

Mackenzie went to the few stacked belongings in the back. Most of them were in plastic bins, labeled with masking tape and black magic marker: **Books and Magazines, Childhood, Mom’s Stuff, Christmas Decorations, Old Baking Stuff.**

Even the manner in which they were stacked seemed very organized. There were a few small cardboard boxes filled with photo albums and framed pictures. Mackenzie looked in a few of the albums but saw nothing that would help. She only saw pictures of smiling family members, beachfront vistas, and a dog that had apparently been a very cherished pet.

Ellington walked over to her and looked around at the boxes. He had his hands on his hips, one of his telltale indicators that he was at a loss. It still surprised her from time to time just how well she knew him.

“I think anything that might have been here to find was already found by the police,” he said. “Maybe we can find something in the files.”

Mackenzie was nodding, but her eyes had fallen on something else. She walked to the far corner, where three of the plastic storage bins had been stacked on top of one another. Tucked exactly in the corner, so far back that she had missed it during her initial inspection, was a doll. It was an older doll, its hair matted and little smudges of dirt on its cheeks. It looked like something that might have been stolen from the set of a cheesy horror movie.

“Creepy,” Ellington said, tracing her gaze.

“And oddly out of place,” Mackenzie said.

She picked the doll up, careful to keep her hands in one position on the back of it, just in case it might be some sort of clue. Sure, at first glance it seemed like just a random object in someone’s storage bin—perhaps something thrown in at the last minute, as an afterthought.

*But everything else in this unit is meticulously stacked and organized. This doll stands out. And not only that, it’s almost as if it were meant to stand out.*

“I think we need to bag it up,” she said. “Why is this one object not boxed up and put away? This place is eerily neat. Why leave this out?”

“You think the killer placed it there?” Ellington asked. But before the question was fully out of his mouth, she could tell that he was considering it as a very real possibility as well.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I think I want to go take another look at Claire Locke’s unit again. And I also want to see how quickly we can get a full case file for the murders in Oregon that you worked on...back in the early days.” She said the last bit with a smile, never missing an opportunity to tease him for being seven years older than she was.

Ellington turned back to Underwood. He was hanging out by the door, pretending not to eavesdrop. “I don’t suppose you ever spoke with Ms. Newcomb outside of renting her the unit, did you?”

“Afraid not,” Underwood said. “I try to be friendly and hospitable to everyone but there’s just so many of them, you know?” He then eyed the doll Mackenzie still held and frowned. “Told you... lots of weird shit in these units.”

Mackenzie didn’t doubt it. But this particular weird item seemed sorely out of place. And she fully intended to find out what it meant.

## Chapter Nine

Due to the late hour, Quinn Tuck had understandably been pissed off when Mackenzie had called. Still, he told them how to get into the complex and where the spare set of keys were. It was just before midnight when Mackenzie and Ellington opened up Claire Locke's storage unit again. Mackenzie couldn't help but feel that they were running in circles—not a feeling that was especially encouraging so early in the case—but she also felt that this was the right move.

With the doll from Elizabeth Newcomb's unit in mind, Mackenzie stepped back into the unit. Perhaps it was just being aware of the late hour, but the place seemed a bit more foreboding this time around. The bins and boxes stacked in the back weren't quite as perfect as the ones in Elizabeth Newcomb's unit, but they were still tidy.

"A little sad, isn't it?" Ellington said.

"What's that?"

"These things...these bins and boxes. Chances are no one who cares about what's inside of them will ever open them."

It was a sad thought, one that Mackenzie tried to push to the back of her mind. She walked to the back of the unit, feeling almost like an intruder. She and Ellington both checked over the contents for any dolls or other disturbances, but found nothing. It then occurred to Mackenzie that she was expecting to find something as obvious as a doll. Maybe there was something different, something smaller...

*Or maybe there's no connection here at all,* she thought.

"You see this?" Ellington asked.

He was kneeling next to the right wall. He nodded toward the corner of the unit, in a thin space between the wall and a stack of cardboard boxes. Mackenzie dropped down to her knees as well and saw what Ellington had spied.

It was a miniature teapot—not miniature as in a small teapot, but more like a playset teapot that little girls might use for an imagined tea time.

She crawled forward and picked it up off the floor. She was rather surprised to find that it was made not of plastic, but of a ceramic material. It felt just like a real teapot, only it was no bigger than six inches tall. She could set the entirety of the thing in her hand.

"If you ask me," Ellington said, "there's no way that was set there by accident or by someone just tired of packing shit into the unit."

"And it didn't just fall out of a box," Mackenzie added. "It's ceramic. If it had fallen from a box, it would have shattered on the floor."

"So what the hell does it mean?"

Mackenzie had no answer. They both looked to the little teapot, quite pretty but also dingy—just like the doll in Elizabeth Newcomb's unit. And despite its small size, Mackenzie felt that it represented something much larger.

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It was 1:05 when they finally checked into a motel. Mackenzie was tired but also invigorated by the puzzle that the doll and the little teapot offered. Once in the room, she took a quick moment to change out of her work clothes and into a T-shirt and gym shorts. She powered up her laptop as Ellington changed into more comfortable clothes as well. She logged into her email and saw that McGrath had assigned someone to send them every single file they had on the Salem, Oregon, storage unit murders from eight years ago.

“What are you doing?” Ellington asked as he stepped up beside her. “It’s late and tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

Ignoring him, she asked: “Was there nothing in the Oregon cases that pointed to any of this? To a doll, a teapot...anything like that?”

“I honestly don’t recall. Like McGrath said, I just ran cleanup. I questioned a few witnesses, tidied up reports and paperwork. If there was anything like that, it didn’t stand out. I’m not ready to say the cases are linked. Yes, they are eerily similar, but not identical. Still...it might not hurt to eventually look into it. Maybe meet with the PD in Salem to see if anyone closer to the case remembers anything like that.”

Mackenzie trusted his word but couldn’t help but scan through several of the files before giving in to the need to sleep. She felt Ellington rest a hand on her shoulder and then felt his face next to hers.

“Am I being lazy if I turn in?”

“No. Am I being over-obsessive if I don’t?”

“No. You’re just being very dedicated to your job.” He kissed her on the cheek and then fell into the room’s single bed.

It was tempting to join him—not for any extracurricular activities, but to just enjoy some sleep before the frantic pace tomorrow would be sure to bring. But she felt that she had to find at least a few more potential pieces to the puzzle, even if they were buried in a case from eight years ago.

From a cursory glance, there was nothing to be found. There had been five people killed, all found in storage units. One of the units had contained more than ten thousand dollars’ worth of valuable baseball cards and another had contained a macabre collection of medieval weaponry. Seven people had been questioned in regards to the deaths but none had ever been convicted. The theory the police and the FBI had worked with was that the killer was abducting his victims and then forcing them to open up their storage units. Based on the original reports, it did not appear as if the killer was stealing anything from the units, although it was obviously next to impossible to be certain of this.

From what Mackenzie could see, there were no peculiar items left behind at the scenes. The files contained pictures of the crime scenes and of the five victims, three of the storage units had been in a messy state, having not seen an obsessively organized touch like that of Elizabeth Newcomb.

Two of the crime scene images were strikingly clear. One was from the scene of the second victim, and the other from the fifth victim. Both units had been in a state of what Mackenzie thought of as organized chaos; there were piles of things here and there, but they were thrown together haphazardly.

Looking at the picture from the second crime scene, Mackenzie scoured the background, zooming in as much as she could without causing the screen to go all pixelated. Near the center of the room, on top of three precariously stacked boxes, she thought she saw something of interest. It looked like a pitcher of some kind, perhaps something to put water or lemonade in. It was sitting on what appeared to be a plate of some kind. While there were other random objects sitting out in the open, these appeared to have been placed with care in the very center of the room.

She stared until her eyes started to ache and could still not be certain what she was looking at. Knowing that it might be a long shot, she opened up an empty email to send directly to two agents she knew would act fast and efficiently—two agents whom, she randomly thought, she and Ellington needed to invite to their wedding: Agents Yardley and Harrison.

She attached the files she had received to the email and wrote a quick message: *Could either of you look into the files for these cases and see if anyone ended up taking an inventory of what was inside the storage units? Maybe check with the owners of the storage facilities.*

Knowing that there was very little left to do, Mackenzie finally allowed herself to go to bed. Because she was so tired and the day came falling down on her in a heap, she was asleep less than two minutes before her head hit the pillow.

Even when the eerie sight of the doll from Elizabeth Newcomb's storage unit surfaced in her head, she managed to ignore it—for the most part—and drift soundly to sleep.

## Chapter Ten

Mackenzie wasn't at all surprised to wake up at 6:30 and find that Agent Harrison had come through. He was practically a research guru and had quickly learned his way around files, folders, and copious amounts of data. His email contained two attachments and a typical to-the-point message.

*The two documents attached are inventories taken by the FBI. These are all we have because the families of two of the other victims refused bureau requests to go through their stored belongings. The fifth is missing because the owner of the facility auctioned the contents off three days after the death. Seems like a bastard thing to do, but the victim had no family to come collect her belongings.*

*I hope this helps. Let me know if you need anything more specific.*

Mackenzie opened up the attachment and found a very simplified list prepared in a simple Word document. The first was seven pages long. The second was thirty-six pages long. The longer document was an inventory for a unit belonging to Jade Barker. The name clicked with Mackenzie instantly; she pulled up the crime scene images from the original documents and saw that the messier one had been Jade Barker's—the same one with the possible plate and pitcher sitting directly in the center of the image.

Mackenzie did a quick search through the document and found the two items listed on page two.

*Toy pitcher.*

*Plastic toy plate.*

Behind her, Ellington was getting dressed. As he buttoned up his shirt, he came over to her and looked at the screen. "Damn," he said. "They came through for you, didn't they?"

"Yes, they did," she said, pointing at the two items. She then considered something for a moment before asking: "Where exactly is Salem, Oregon?"

"Northern part of the state. I'm not sure where." He paused, looked at her with amused irritation, and sighed. "You planning on taking a day trip?"

"I think it might be worth it. I'd like to get a look at the sites and maybe speak to some of the family members."

"We have family members to speak with here," Ellington pointed out. "Starting with Elizabeth Newcomb's parents. And honestly, I'd like to have a chat with the policemen that originally went into that storage unit to get a detailed report."

"Sounds like you've got your morning planned out, then."

"Mac...Salem is like four hours away, I think. No sense in splitting up just so you can be on the road all damn day just to *hopefully* get a fuzzy idea of what happened out there eight years ago."

Mackenzie opened up a tab on her laptop and typed in *Seattle and Salem, OR*. Without looking back to him, she said: "It's three and a half hours...say three with me driving. If all goes smooth, I'll be back by dinner."

"If all goes smooth," Ellington echoed.

She smiled and stood up. "I love you, too."

With that, she kissed him and rather wished she *had* retired to bed a little earlier last night.

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"Harrison, I need you to find some more information for me."

There was something about driving and speaking on the phone that exhilarated Mackenzie. Sure, she knew it was frowned upon but in her line of work, she saw it as the ultimate form of multi-tasking.

“And good morning to you, too,” Agent Harrison said from the other end of the phone. “I take it you got my mail?”

“I did. And it was a tremendous help. But I was wondering if you could do some more digging for me.”

She knew he would agree. In the past, he’d have to worry with what McGrath would think. But with Mackenzie’s new role and position directly under McGrath, she knew that Harrison would push her request to the top of his pile.

“What do you need?”

“I’m heading toward Salem, Oregon, right now to get a look at the crime scenes and interview anyone that I can. I’d like for you to see if you can find the names and contact information for any family or close friends of the victims that live in the area.”

“Yeah, I can get on that. How long of a drive are you looking at?”

“About three more hours.”

“You’ll have everything you need before you get there.”

“Thanks, Harrison.”

“So, is this case like some weird sort of pre-honeymoon thing for you two?” he asked.

“Far from it. I guess you could say it’s sort of like foreplay,” she joked.

“Yeah, that’s too much information. Let me get back to work for you. Happy trails, Agent White.”

They ended the call, leaving Mackenzie to stare out at Interstate 5 with nothing but her thoughts. She kept thinking about the image from the storage unit of Jade Barker, dead for about eight years. If the plate and pitcher she had spotted in the image were the same two objects that had been inventoried by the FBI, what did it mean? Sure, it was a thin connection to some weird findings in this new Seattle case, but where did it lead? Even if she left Salem with irrefutable proof that the killer was leaving behind tea party-themed trinkets and toys (and yes, she included dolls in a tea party theme), did it really accomplish much of anything?

*Sure it does, she thought to herself. It gives us a bizarre path to pursue. It lets us hone in on one specific feature of the crime scenes—a feature that apparently means something special to the killer.*

And there was one more thing, too. It would give them a glimpse into just how dangerous and warped this killer could be.

## Chapter Eleven

True to his word, Harrison had given Mackenzie all of the information he could find. She had it all by the time she was half an hour away from Salem. The information came in a mixture of texts and emails with attachments. And while there wasn't much to go on, Mackenzie thought she had more than enough.

She'd also taken some time during her drive to call ahead to the Salem Police Department. She asked if there would be anyone available to speak with her about the storage facility murders from five years ago. After a bit of shocked silence on the other end of the line, she was given the name of Detective Alan Hall.

With all of that information at the ready, Mackenzie started her trip to Salem with a visit to the police station. It appeared to be a run-of-the-mill slow day in the station. The receptionist was wiping down her desk with a cloth while three officers milled around a single desk in the back, chatting about something.

"Can I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"I'm Special Agent Mackenzie White. I'm supposed to meet with Detective Hall."

"Oh yes," the receptionist said. "Let me just get him up here for you."

The receptionist paged another office in the building through her phone and, after a few moments, said, "Your visitor is here."

"Thanks," Mackenzie said after she hung up.

"Sure. Where are you driving in from, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Flew out of DC yesterday, to Seattle."

The receptionist tried to smile at this, but she was apparently adding things up in her head and deciding that something bad must have happened. Instead of trying to continue with chitchat, she turned back to cleaning her desk.

Before she had scrubbed a handful of times, a plainclothes detective came walking toward the little galley area where the receptionist was cleaning. He seemed a little surprised by the sight of Mackenzie but did his best to hide it. He was an older man, floating somewhere between fifty and fifty-five at Mackenzie's guess. He wore one of those little driver caps that some men look goofy in, but he pulled it off quite well.

"Agent White?" he asked.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, offering his hand when he stuck it out for a shake. "Nice to meet you, Detective Hall."

"You may change your mind about that soon enough," he said. "I'll level with you: this case haunts me. It damn near made me quit my job. So I'll help in any way I can, but I'd really rather not dwell on it."

"Of course," she said. "Do you mind if we speak in private somewhere?"

"How about in my car?" Hall said. "I'll tell you what I can on the way out to the first storage complex. It's about fifteen minutes away."

"That sounds good," she said.

Apparently, Hall wasn't one for formalities. He gave her a curt little nod and started heading for the front door without another word. Mackenzie followed him and started to feel some sort of odd dread creeping up on her.

*This case haunts me*, he had said.

Based on the look of unease in his eyes as he had turned toward the door, Mackenzie didn't doubt him one bit.

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“He’s doing it again, right?”

The question was out of Hall’s mouth before they were even out of the parking lot. He had a look of certainty on his face, as if he had been expecting to hear such news for a very long time now.

“He is,” she answered. “Or so it seems. In Seattle. What makes you sure enough to ask a question like that?”

“The way he went about killing them...just leaving them there to be found or rot...it doesn’t make sense that he’d just stop. I think we got close to getting him, I really do. I think that’s why he stopped when he did. But I’ve always felt that he’d pop up somewhere else and start again.”

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